

WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT CONSERVATION THROUGH THE MECHANICAL REMOVAL OF NON-NATIVE TROUT IN THREE STREAMS OF SOUTHWEST MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
June 28, 2013**

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to remove non-native trout by mechanical methods from the South Fork North Fork Divide Creek upstream of and including South Fork Reservoir, Bostwick Creek, and Beehive Basin Creek including Egg Lake. The removal of non-native trout would serve to secure several of the few remaining native westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) populations in the Big Hole River and Gallatin River drainages by eliminating competition and hybridization from non-native trout. The mechanical means proposed for fish collection and removal include electrofishing the streams, netting the lakes, and draining of South Fork Reservoir.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. An Environmental Assessment (EA), in compliance with MEPA, was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on May 3, 2013.

Public comments on the proposed project were taken for 30 days (through June 4, 2013). The EA was mailed to 36 individuals and groups; legal notice was printed in the Montana Standard (Butte), Bozeman Chronicle, and Big Sky Weekly newspapers. A draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>. A total of three comments were received. Additional information was also provided by the public that corrected some minor errors related to the Beehive Basin Creek section of the EA. The EA states, "The majority of WCT in the stream are located on private land downstream of the forest boundary within the Summit View Subdivision." There are actually two subdivisions on Beehive Basin Creek. The Beehive Subdivision additionally exists. Owners of property in Beehive Subdivision were also sent the public notice and contacted individually regarding the project. The EA also states that, "Land along most of the stream is managed under an existing Nature Conservancy conservation agreement." This statement is incorrect; the easement on the property is held by the Gallatin Valley Land Trust, not the Nature Conservancy.

Summary of Public Comment

Comment: "As a full time resident of the Summit View Subdivision and the President of the Board of the Summit View Owners Association (SVOA), I would like to offer the

support of our property owners for the EA to remove non native trout from the Beehive Creek and its source, Egg Lake, in favor of preserving an existing population of WCT.

Since most all of the property owners of the SVOA are here only part time, the association has given its Board of Directors broad authority to represent the owners. As President of that Board, I endorse the project and look forward to working with Bruce Roberts and Mike Vaughn on next steps once the decision to proceed is made.”

Response: None necessary.

Comment: “Once again I have to question the judgment of killing Yellowstone cutthroat (NATIVE) to reintroduce a species that is not 100% pure westslope. My information on westslope cutthroat is that all have had some hybridization with rainbows. Is this correct? Also, just leave it alone. If the westslopes didn't survive before, they are not going to later!”

Response: Yellowstone cutthroat trout is a native species in Montana but they are not native to any streams or lakes in the Missouri River drainage. Yellowstone cutthroat are native only to the Yellowstone River drainage in Montana but they were also the most widely stocked cutthroat trout across Montana in the early 1900's. There are many lakes in the Missouri River drainage that were historically fishless that now contain self-sustaining populations of Yellowstone cutthroat trout because of past stocking, (e.g., Egg Lake). There will be no management changes at the majority of these lakes unless they pose a hybridization threat to a native population of westslope cutthroat downstream.

Not all westslope cutthroats are hybridized with rainbows. There are still many remaining westslope populations that are not hybridized. All Montana populations that have at least 90% westslope genes are considered to be of conservation value while those that are non-hybridized are considered to have the highest conservation value. There are very few non-hybridized populations left in some drainages such as the Gallatin. Those that are even slightly hybridized, therefore, have conservation value because they are all that remain of the species in that area. Conservation efforts have been aimed primarily at conserving the remaining non-hybridized fish in other drainages where there are more of these populations. FWP's conservation efforts in general will continue to be focused on those streams that have non-hybridized westslope cutthroat, but in some areas where few if any such populations exist conservation will be focused on those populations that contain at least 90% westslope cutthroat.

The lake at the headwaters of Beehive Basin Creek (Egg Lake) was historically fishless. Natural fish barriers in the stream precluded native westslope cutthroat trout from accessing the lake. Yellowstone cutthroat trout were introduced to the lake sometime in the last century. FWP has no stocking record for the lake, but stocking records are scant prior to 1950. It was a common practice before this time to give fish to local sporting groups who would transport the fish to various lakes and streams to stock them. We have no record of where these fish went, but many of the formerly fishless alpine lakes that today have self-sustaining populations of fish are a result of these stockings. Egg Lake would likely not have been stocked with Yellowstone cutthroat trout if westslope cutthroat would have been historically present, as there would ensure a self-sustaining population of fish. The only reason the lake is being targeted for fish removal is that Yellowstone cutthroat trout pose a hybridization risk to the native westslope cutthroat in

the stream below. Restocking Egg Lake with westslope from the stream below will eliminate the hybridization risk and still provide a fishery for folks to enjoy.

Comment: “Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Targeted projects to recover and protect existing populations of westslope cutthroat are vitally important to the overall effort to conserve this native species. All projects covered by the EA are consistent with the goals and objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement for WCT and the statewide fisheries management plan. Methods proposed are reasonable, and the chance of successful outcomes are high. I support each of the projects covered by the EA as listed in the preferred alternative for each.”

Response: None necessary.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and benefits and risks associated with this project, it is my decision to go forward with the proposed action of removing non-native trout by mechanical methods from the South Fork North Fork Divide Creek upstream of and including: South Fork Reservoir, Bostwick Creek, and Beehive Basin Creek, including Egg Lake. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. I therefore conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. J. Flowers', with a large, stylized loop at the end.

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor
